

Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes
June 12, 2012
Fort Peck Hatchery

CAC members present: Bernie Hart, Steve Harada, Bob Waldron, Mark Peterson, Stan Lund, Terry Stoppa, Connie Iversen, Jason Holt, Steve Schindler, Henry Gordon

CAC members absent: Jim Carver, Don Groven, Jason Deming, Scott Billingsley,

FWP staff present: Pat Gunderson, Mike Herman, Mark Sullivan, Steve Dalbey, Scott Thompson, Michael Nye, Wade Geraets, Ron Selden

Guests: Aaron Johnson, CMR Fort Peck station manager; Norm and Kim Girard, Glasgow; Joe Yeoman, Fort Peck; Bill Latka, Hinsdale

There were no public comments during the open section. Schindler said the group should be aware of a proposed land exchange that is part of the Fort Belknap Tribes' pending federal reserved water rights compact now being considered in Congress. He and Peterson asked that the issue be discussed in more detail at the next meeting.

As of this meeting, Billingsley has completed his second term, and Groven, Deming, Lund and Harada have completed their first terms. Gunderson thanked each for their service. As part of ongoing efforts to cut agency spending, Gunderson said only four of the openings will be filled. Harada said our FWP commissioners should be invited to all CAC meetings.

Stoppa asked for an update on the proposed Bailey Reservoir Fishing Access Site (FAS), which FWP is purchasing southwest of Havre. Malta-area biologist Thompson gave a presentation on the recent translocation of sage grouse to southern Alberta. He explained that much of the land where the birds were moved is publically owned, which means it tends to be less developed. Energy development is also declining in this area, so habitat conditions for sage grouse are improving.

Holt said he's concerned that not enough is known about the reasons behind sage grouse declines in the province. Without a clear understanding, the translocated birds could experience the same fate. Peterson said global climate change could have a role in declining Canadian bird numbers. He asked whether other birds will be sent to Alberta in future years.

Thompson said he expects biologists there to request more sage grouse. It was good to see that a number of this year's translocated birds nested. Schindler asked about costs of the program. The Alberta government is footing most of the bill.

Sullivan, the Region 6 wildlife program manager, gave an overview of elk management. He explained that the statewide elk management plan is broken into districts. There is a general elk season north of U.S. Highway 2, in part because agricultural interests there have a low tolerance for the species. It's also being used as a management tool to control chronic wasting disease, which has already been detected in some neighboring states and provinces.

Elk surveys here are flown every other year. Currently, there are about 2,300 elk estimated to be in the Region 6 districts. That's down from a high of about 4,500 elk in past years. Hart asked if hunting access has improved. Sullivan said some ranch ownership has changed hands in recent years, but that hasn't necessarily translated into more public access. In addition, the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have instituted more road closures.

Holt said he's seen a lot more hunters carrying sophisticated global positioning units that give a much better on-the-ground reading of land ownership than traditional maps and compasses.

Sullivan noted that the FWP Commission has recently increased the number of either-sex, elk-archery licenses in the Missouri River Breaks. But now we've seen a drop in bull elk in some districts. Either-sex rifle permit numbers are being decreased a bit to help compensate.

Stoppa asked if FWP has considered prohibiting hunters who successfully draw either-sex elk licenses from applying in that drawing for a number of years, as is done with either-sex bighorn licenses. Sullivan said commissioners have considered restrictions in the past but none have ever been approved. Schindler said the Valley County Sportsmen Club formally supported this in the past, but some area landowners were against it.

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Holt asked about the types of game damage FWP typically has to deal with. Gunderson said it varies depending on conditions, but he noted that elk damage in Region 6 is usually on late-summer standing crops as opposed to stored crops.

Sullivan said there are less game damage problems now with elk numbers down a bit, but there are still issues in the Bears Paw Mountains, where public access is very limited. FWP can always sell more elk licenses, but wildlife managers don't want to overload the system with hunters when they don't have a lot of places to go.

Schindler said he'd like to see Hunting District 680 separated from HD 690 to create more hunting opportunities. HD 680 doesn't get hunted that hard now, and there's a lot of

public land there. Most people focus their hunting in the Bears Paws, rather than in the Breaks. Gordon said that he sees some elk on his land in the Chinook area, but he has rarely drawn licenses to hunt them.

Gunderson gave the group an update on the state's bison conservation and management process. A programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS) is being developed. Members were given a synopsis of comments from this spring's public scoping meetings around the state. Holt said he'd like to see the group again formally submit its opinion about the transfer of wild bison into Region 6.

Following a lengthy discussion, all CAC members in attendance agreed to sign onto a letter stating that the group "still recommends that the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks not relocate wild bison to any place within the boundaries of Region 6." They also asked that their recommendation be included in a news release to area media outlets.

FWP PROGRAM UPDATES

Region 6 program managers submitted written updates to members prior to the meeting. Stoppa praised law enforcement efforts and noted that there needs to be a lot more wardens stationed in the field. Hart asked what FWP is doing to increase law enforcement efforts in the Bakken oil play. Gunderson said we don't have the resources to add more wardens there right now.

Hart said the number of antlerless white-tailed deer licenses should be further reduced in the Milk River Valley between Chinook and Glasgow. Iversen asked about the frequency of deer surveys. Sullivan said they're completed every year.

Schindler asked whether Block Management cooperators can still be paid in full if they limit white-tail hunting on their property. Nye, the Region 6 hunting access coordinator, said they would not. Nye said FWP will put notes in the Region 6 BMA guides saying that some places have low deer numbers, especially the Glasgow area, and direct whitetail deer hunters to go to the northeast corner of the Region or the Havre area, where whitetail numbers are still near average levels.

CAC ROUNDTABLE

Mark Peterson, Havre – Whitetail and mule deer numbers are very low in his area. There are some sharp-tailed grouse around, but hardly any antelope. Lots of folks around Havre are concerned about wolves, and some have reported sightings north of U.S. Highway 2. Another local issue is the Bureau of Reclamation continuing to refuse to open the Milk River to public fishing immediately below the dam at Fresno Reservoir.

He asked that an update on Bailey Reservoir FAS funding be provided at the next CAC meeting.

Steve Harada, Wolf Point – With all of the fish spilling out of Fort Peck Reservoir into the lower Missouri River this past year, enforcement has become a big issue. Lots of people are catching lots of fish. FWP biologists need to continue monitoring the passage of reservoir fish into the river.

Herman said he's not hearing too many enforcement concerns there from the people who are being checked. He noted that fishing has been good in that section of river for many years, excluding periods of severe drought.

Dalbey said it's very expensive to conduct full-scale monitoring of fish flushing, but fisheries staff is preparing to do some limited sampling in early September when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans to do a reservoir spill to test new repairs.

Connie Iversen, Culbertson – She asked for details about the pending FWP budget shortfalls. Gunderson explained the funding cycles and how they're tied to license increases. In addition, the agency has grown.

Iversen said she likes the access signing projects the department has been involved in. She especially appreciates the one-on-one relationship it cultivates with private landowners.

Steve Schindler, Glasgow – He agreed that fishing has been very good the past year in the river below Fort Peck Dam. He asked how far up the reservoir fish flushing is likely to occur when water releases are high. He's heard that high flows are also pulling fish out of the other large reservoirs below Fort Peck, especially Lake Sakakawea.

Henry Gordon, Chinook – He's seen no major decrease in white-tail and mule deer numbers on his place. Pheasant numbers are looking very good, and some are even showing up on the open prairie in his area. But he can't find any Hungarian partridge. He's seeing a few pronghorns, including does with this year's young.

He recently did a two-hour flight in a helicopter and shot a lot of coyotes. He also destroyed a number of dens on his property.

Stan Lund, Plentywood – He's troubled by the continued cultivation of lands that was formerly enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. That's adversely impacting wildlife.

We should continue to be wary about releasing pheasants, because their survival rates tend to be so low. There seems to be good pheasant hatches this year in his area. FWP is spending a lot of time and money on access, which future generations will thank us for.

He's completing his first term on the CAC and does not plan to apply for a second term. He's enjoyed his tenure. He said it's especially important for CAC members to continue interacting with sportsmen.

Bernie Hart, Hinsdale – There are good numbers of pheasants showing up around his area, which should mean a good year for new birds. He noted that a state administrative rule says that up to 15 percent of Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program funding must be used for bird releases. At the same time, everyone knows that releasing birds is bad policy, especially considering the low survival rates.

Jason Holt, Hinsdale – He said they have a neighbor who questions the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s method of counting sage grouse. Some people also think the FWP public meetings on bison only amounted to a sales pitch, and that the agency didn’t really listen to the people who attended.

REGION 6 ACCESS PROGRAM

Nye gave updates on the development of a new statewide access plan, the first of its kind. She’s on the committee, which is comprised of representatives from all of FWP’s seven regions, as well as Helena staff. She said a draft statewide plan should be completed by the end of August. Final endorsement from the FWP Commission is expected in October.

Peterson inquired about the status of the pending Milk River Ranch purchase northwest of Havre and whether a site-specific access plan will be developed for that property. Nye said if that land is acquired as a wildlife management area, it will fall under the Region 6 access plan. That plan is being rewritten so it runs concurrently with the new statewide plan.

Harada asked what impacts the bison issue is having on Block Management enrollment. Nye said we’re going to lose several properties this year because of it. Schindler said FWP itself isn’t hurt by the property losses, the hunting public is.

Peterson requested a three-year report on Region 6 access numbers; Gordon asked if it is true that lands lost out of the Block Management Program this year won’t be replaced because of attrition. Nye said that is correct.

The next CAC meeting is set for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sept. 11 at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Please submit suggested agenda items to Pat Gunderson or Ron Selden as soon as possible.

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